

Lady Mary Minx's Repentance.

Lady Mary Minx was clever, strong minded, and had temper, and she imagined she held her good natured, vain mother, the Countess Dowager of Scilly, in complete subordination. When, therefore, one morning at breakfast the latter informed her that she had on the previous evening been applied to by the able young actor, Mr. St. George Conningsby, her ladyship was both surprised and indignant, and expressed her opinion of the Countess and the Countess's betrothed with great vigour and free eulogium. As long as the remarks were applied only to herself, the Countess bore them in her usual meek and submissive manner; but when Lady Mary proceeded to denounce Mr. Conningsby in all the terms of her varied and powerful vocabulary, she suddenly became very angry, and with a look of scorn and indignation, she said, "You are a little too much for me, my dear. This, she accordingly did, as usual, as her mother's eloquence allowed her an opportunity. But the effect of her remarks was not effaced. Henceforth the Countess bore her sister towards her daughter with a coldness and a hauteur to which that young lady was not accustomed, and which she did not like.

Lady Mary knew well the hand some young actor to whom the Countess had become engaged; and before that event took place, she had admired him very much, and even liked him. But since his engagement she absolutely detested him. His presence was to her almost intolerable; and when he came home, as he now frequently did, to lunch at the dowager's house, she usually found some excuse for being from home. Occasionally she had to meet him; and then she watched his behaviour very closely. As far as admiring bearing was concerned, she had to admit to herself that he was a perfect gentleman. He was easy and polished in his manners, and there was about him a certain staidness of men which, though to an untidily critic like herself, might savour of the stage, as well on one of his noble and distinguished appearance. But though in these respects he was all that could be desired, every time Lady Mary saw him she disliked him more and more. To her keen eyes it was clear that he was not the young man she had been attracted to, but to the wealthy, to another widow of home, lovely, but of great fortune, Mrs. Blunt, he was almost as affectionate in his manner as towards his betrothed. But she had watched him long, Lady Mary became convinced that he was not the young man she had been attracted to, but to the wealthy, to another widow of home, lovely, but of great fortune, Mrs. Blunt, he was almost as affectionate in his manner as towards his betrothed.

Under these circumstances she had little difficulty in persuading herself that it was her duty to break off the engagement; and she was resolved it should be broken off. As to the means she felt no scruples. If she could find any, be they fair or foul, she would willingly use them. For some time all her observation and all her ingenuity were unsuccessful. The course of the engaged couple's love was on the whole running very smooth. The Dowager was warm and constant in her affection for Mr. Conningsby, and she, if she seemed scarcely so attentive as at first, he could hardly be considered negligent. Formerly he came almost every day to lunch, and not infrequently after he left the theatre he would sit with them, while now he thought twice or three times in the course of the week quite sufficient. This intention evidently annoyed and alarmed the Countess. She seemed to suspect that some one else was making advances to him, and she was therefore naturally anxious to have the marriage hurried on. So it was clear that if Lady Mary wished to prevent it, she must take some decisive step without delay.

Though not so regular in visiting as formerly, Mr. Conningsby was still very attentive in writing to his betrothed. Every morning, as sure as the sun came a little note to her from him. Lady Mary, however, in her mother's absence, made various attempts to discover into her apartments, in order to study these productions. It was while engaged on one of these that a device occurred to her which might, she considered, be carried out well, and it was to the match she so hated. It was to be worked by means of a false note. She would write a letter purporting to be from Mr. Conningsby to some lady of the hotel, and direct it to the Dowager. In the morning it would arrive by the same post as his letter. She, through whose hands all the letters by the early posts passed before reaching the Countess, could retain the real letter and allow the forged one to go to her mother instead. The latter, if the note was ingeniously written, would at once conclude that Mr. Conningsby, when he was writing to her, had also written to a humbler lady, and, by mistake, had enclosed the wrong note in the envelope addressed to her. If she could but do this without discovery, Lady Mary was certain the match would be at an end. She knew how jealous her mother was, how easily her vanity was hurt. The rage and indignation she would feel at his supposed duplicity and contempt for her would soon put an end to her love. The only objection was that it was an extremely dangerous undertaking. If it were discovered there would be an irreparable breach between her mother and herself, and the same time the letter would be addressed to "Miss or Little," or some such common name, it would be difficult for her to deny it.

Next day she spent several hours writing a letter which might pass for one of Mr. Conningsby's. She had a pretty form for imitating other people's handwriting, and before she had practised very long, she had written some lines which it would have taken a very clever expert to have said were not his work. She then composed the following note:

DEAREST TOTTIE—An sorry I shall be able to call on you to-morrow night as I have to get up early to the gold-bug I am going to marry. She is getting rather disconcerted of late at my negligence, and so I have to console the different. It is late. I am extremely sorry to write to her. So good-bye till fair—Your own

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As she knew Mr. Conningsby was to sup with them the following evening, she took the opportunity that she had of writing from a hall to post her own production.

Next morning while the Countess, who since their quarrel seldom came down for breakfast, was still in her bedroom, the forged letter and one from Mr. Conningsby arrived. Lady Mary received them with a score of others, but so well she imitated Mr. Conningsby's writing that for a moment she was placed in some difficulty. She could scarcely distinguish her own from his. She remembered that the envelope she used had a peculiar watermark, and holding up the one letter between her and the light, she noted this peculiarity, and then settled any doubt she had. Retaining the other letter, she gave the forged one to Lady Scilly's maid.

Lady Mary then hurriedly looked up the postmarked note. She was glad the handwriting was so identical, but she noted some difficulty in distinguishing them, surely her mother would never expect forgery. She had hardly got the letter secreted when Lady Scilly's maid returned to her, pale and frightened looking.

"Oh, my lady," she cried, "her ladyship has taken ill. I think she is in hysterics. Will your ladyship please see her?"

"Has she sent for me?" asked Lady Mary, very much scared.

"No, my lady," answered the maid. "Then ask her I may come. I don't like to intrude on her without her permission."

The fact was, Lady Mary was not at all anxious to see her mother. Her guilty conscience had already begun to trouble her; and she was afraid that if she went just then into her mother's presence, her crime would in some way or other come out. She waited uneasily until the maid returned, which she did not do for a considerable time; and then, by the Countess's direction, she informed Lady Mary that her ladyship was much better, and did not wish to see her just at present—news which eased Lady Mary's mind not a little.

In about an hour, Lady Scilly's maid came to her to tell her that her ladyship would not be down that day to lunch; and, in reply to inquiries, said that the invalid was much better and engaged in writing. Lady Mary had little difficulty in guessing what she was writing about. She felt so uncomfortable that she could no longer remain in the house. So, after lunch, on the plea of having some purchases to make, she spent a considerable time driving about rather aimlessly.

When she returned it was about six o'clock—she noticed that the household was in an excited state, and she soon learned the cause. The Countess, after writing and sending (one for Mr. Conningsby and the other for Mrs. Blunt), had become so ill that the butler had felt it his duty to send for the family physician, Dr. Killen. That gentleman was now with her, and they were waiting to hear his report.

Lady Mary was horrified by this intelligence. Her mother was, it seemed, seriously ill; it might be dangerous, it might be fatal, it was caused by her act—she felt as if she would go to her mother's bedside, not for her mother's, but for her own interests. What would she do if the Countess died? Would she not be her murderer? The thought was terrible, but she could not help it. Her mother's expression. How her change was now evident! Turn with regret and fear, too, conscience-stricken to venture into her mother's presence, she waited in agony at the bed-room door until Dr. Killen came out.

"Oh doctor," she said, when he had last appeared, "is she seriously ill?"

"Yes, Lady Mary," replied the doctor; "very seriously, I am afraid. She must have suffered a terrible shock of some kind or another. It seems as if she were going to have brain fever! Is that very dangerous?"

"Very," replied the doctor in a solemn tone. "And I don't think it right to conceal from you, Lady Mary, that I greatly fear her ladyship will not recover."

While the doctor was speaking, Lady Mary stood gazing at him with a dazed look. Suddenly, however, he caught her, she fell fainting at his feet. It seemed likely enough for a time that Lady Mary would soon be suffering from brain fever as well as the Countess. She was certainly scarcely in her right mind for several days; but fortunately as her mother grew worse she grew better. Before a week was over she had, as it by a superhuman effort of will, thrown off her illness, and she insisted on Dr. Killen's strongest recommendations, in nursing her now delicate mother.

Lady Mary had not the reputation of being a very dutiful or affectionate daughter. All her friends had seen or heard how she again and again had annoyed or shocked her poor mother by her wilfulness or her bitter tongue. But now she craved herself in her care in a way almost beyond belief. Day and night she watched by the sick-bed, watching and tending the sufferer with an indefatigable tenderness. People were soon to wonder how it was that Mr. Conningsby had not called or written to her mother ever since that eventful morning. It was strange that he should be so calmly a false charge, which dealt such a blow to his prospects. She had resolved that when her mother was sufficiently recovered, she would confess to her everything and absolve the young actor from the charge. But now, as she pondered over his action, she felt inclined to change her resolution. It was plain that he was either glad of an excuse for breaking off the engagement, or was actually carrying on an illicit correspondence in which he might have been discovered. In either case, it would be a small kindness to her mother to bring him and her again together.

One day Dr. Killen, after he had examined his patient and pronounced her to be progressing in the most satisfactory manner, on leaving the room, motioned to Lady Mary to follow him. When she went out, he said to her:

"I suppose you have heard of Mr. Conningsby?"

"No, doctor," she answered eagerly. "What is he?"

"Well, he's engaged to Mrs. Blunt," said the doctor.

"To Mrs. Blunt," exclaimed Lady Mary.

"Yes. Now the reason I asked you to come out was to caution you on no account to mention this, or to let it be known to the Countess's hearing. We did not know what the shock was which caused her illness, but it was clear from her remarks when delirious that it was something about Mr. Conningsby."

"Yes," answered Lady Mary, but in a somewhat absent-minded manner that Dr. Killen, with an unusual air, bade her good day, and went away.

When Lady Mary returned to the sick room, the Countess had fallen asleep, and so she had both time and quietness for reflection. She now remembered that her mother, when she received the forged letter, had written both to Mr. Conningsby and Mrs. Blunt. There was nothing in the letter she sent to indicate that it was written to Mrs. Blunt—in fact, it could hardly seem to be. Was it merely by chance that her mother had set it down as intended for Mrs. Blunt? Or had she some private information of the way things were trending at that quarter? One thing was certain, the cause of Mr. Conningsby not replying to her mother's change was now evident! In consideration, he had doubtless concluded that Mrs. Blunt was a better catch than the Countess.

While Lady Mary was engaged in these reflections her mother awoke. She had been free from delirium for some days past, and had noticed, and been greatly troubled by the devotion of her daughter. All traces of their quarrel were gone, and mother and daughter were on more affectionate and confidential terms than they had been since Lady Mary was a child. Though, by the sad, regretful expression that occasionally passed over the Countess's face, Lady Mary knew she was thinking of her lost lover and of the letter which had caused her such pain, neither had ladyship once to the subject. On this occasion, however, the Countess suddenly turned to her daughter and said:

"Have you heard anything of Mr. Conningsby lately?"

"Not much, mamma," answered Lady Mary vaguely, and in an embarrassed sort of way.

"Has his engagement with Mrs. Blunt been announced yet?" asked the Countess.

"Lady Mary started. How did she know of his engagement? Was it merely an inference from some information she had before her illness? Or was it a delusion of her delirium still remaining with her? Lady Mary would have given the whole of her life to answer the two questions; but, remembering the doctor's orders, she bent over her and, kissing her, said:

"Mamma, dear, you should not think of these things. They are all past now. Mr. Conningsby will, I'm sure, be here before long to see you."

"Never!" exclaimed the Countess with strong vehemence. "Never with my consent. He is a mean adventurer—a fortune-hunter of the lowest kind. I always suspected as much, but I will not think on it. And I never thought he would be so cold-blooded. Mrs. Blunt may have him with all my heart."

Lady Mary was frightened at her mother's passion. She endeavored to calm her and to turn her thoughts to some other subject, but she failed, and the Countess continued talking in broken and passionate phrases; but she was very weak, and soon became exhausted. Lady Mary, who for some time feared that the fever had returned, breathed freely once more when she saw her sink back into a sound and quiet sleep.

That night, Lady Mary went back to her own bedroom, to sleep there for the first time since she left it to nurse her mother. The return to her old ways induced her to reflect on all she had recently gone through. In the midst of her meditation she suddenly remembered that the letter she had stopped in transmission lay in that room locked up where she placed it on the day she perpetrated the deed. She took it out to destroy it. When she saw it, and thought of all the suffering it had caused, of the long days and sleepless nights of fruitless repentance and painful watching, of the weeks of sickness, when the shadow of death seemed to be over the house, and when she feared every moment would make her a suicide, she had the courage to touch it. She had intended to tear it out without looking at it, but a strange curiosity possessed her to read the last of her mother's love-letters, and, with trembling hands, she opened it. When she read the contents she turned ghastly pale, and a moment afterwards burst into bitter and almost hysterical laughter. The note she had stopped was her own. —London Truth.

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